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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project Impact*Net, a model project for delivering training to paraeducators and teachers in light of requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. The project delivered four semester-length courses to instructional sites serving 69 participants in Delaware, Idaho, Pennsylvania, and Utah. The Project Impact*Net delivery system is a live, Internet-based, two-way audio/video system. This system allows the participants at the four sites to receive training simultaneously and to see and hear the instructor and fellow classmates at other sites. The first two courses are designed for paraprofessionals and each class is composed of 10 3-hour sessions. The second set of courses is designed for paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers and each class is composed of three, 3-hour sessions. The first two courses use a curriculum designed to increase paraprofessionals' skills in working with at-risk students and students with disabilities. The second set of courses uses a curriculum designed to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills to supervise their paraprofessionals and strengthen their instructional team. Student achievement is assessed using a pre-posttest curriculum-based assessment and weekly progress checks. Course evaluation data are provided by participants, site coordinators, and project advisory board members. (DB)

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Uniting Rural, Urban and Suburban America! Live Internet-based Paraeducator and Teacher Training in Idaho, Utah, Delaware, and Pennsylvania

Educators have long recognized the need for well-trained paraprofessionals who assist teachers and provide related services in special and inclusive education classrooms (Blalock, 1991; Drecktrah, 2000; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). In January of 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB), transforming the recognized need for well trained paraprofessionals into a federal mandate. NCLB requires paraprofessional candidates desiring work in Title-1 programs to hold an associate's degree, show 48-60 hours of semester credit on their transcript, or pass a rigorous local or state test indicating that they are "highly qualified." The requirements of the NCLB act extend these same requirements to all paraprofessionals, including paraprofessionals working in special education who work in schools designated as "school wide" Title-1 programs. Finally, all paraprofessionals hired prior to January 2002 must meet NCLB requirements no later than January 2006 to resume employment. It is widely believed that similar requirements for special education paraprofessionals will be announced with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

With over 500,000 paraeducators working in U.S. schools (French, 1999) and the projected number to exceed 1,000,000 early in this decade, (Pickett, 1999) school districts, state departments of education and institutions of higher education have a daunting training task before them. The magnitude of the challenge is magnified due to some paraprofessionals' geographic isolation, public school districts' problems in developing comprehensive paraprofessional training programs that are based on existing standards, limitations in deployment of local experts to deliver training, and finally lack of funding for developing and delivering training.

Distance education is one alternative for delivering training and ameliorating the obstacles listed. In this presentation, Project Impact*Net, a model project for delivering training to paraeducators and teachers is described and is organized by instructional sites, instructional delivery system, courses, structure, curricula and assessment.

Instructional Sites

Beginning fall of 2002 Impact*NET courses were delivered to instructional sites in Wilmington, Delaware, Rexburg, Idaho, Turbotville, Pennsylvania, and Brigham City, Utah. In total, 69 participants from the four sites participated in the training. Approximately, two thirds of the participants were paraprofessionals and the rest were teachers. Initially, project staff identified prospective instructional sites by following leads from national and state educational leaders in paraprofessional development. More specific screening criteria established for selection of project sites were (1) District sites had to be located in one of three time zones: Mountain, Central or Eastern. Scheduling logistics prevented accommodating sites from more than three time zones, (2) A district was required to employ 40 or more paraprofessionals, so that a subgroup of 20 participants would be available for two semesters and another 20 participants for the next two semesters, (3) District sites were required to either possess or be willing to purchase the necessary hardware and software, (4) A district official was required to provide administrative support by signing a letter of agreement enumerating the responsibilities that they would attend to related to the project. These responsibilities included (a) recruitment of 20 participants for the course offerings, (b) identification of a site coordinator and technician (c) reservation and maintenance of a classroom space, (d) support

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of participants as they completed course requirements, (e) maintenance of ongoing communications among coordinators, technicians, and project staff, and (f) facilitation of course evaluation at test delivery.

Instructional Delivery System

The Project Impact*NET delivery system is a live Internet-based, two-way audio/video system. This system allows the participants at the four sites to receive training simultaneously and to see and hear the instructor and fellow classmates at other sites. The site coordinator is also able to see and hear all participants at each site (see figure 1). I-visit, produced by Eyematic is the software application that supports the delivery system. Integral to the support and maintenance of the delivery system are the Project Impact*NET instructional designer and his assistant and the technical coordinators present at each site

The hardware to deliver Project Impact*NET instruction includes a computer connected to a reasonably fast Internet connection, sound mixer, microphones, microphone stands and cables, high end digital camera, internet server and a teleprompter. To receive an instructional broadcast, each site must also have a reasonably fast Internet connection, sound mixer, microphone, microphone stand and cables. Instructional sites do not require a high-end digital camera; a less expensive web camera works well. In addition, instructional sites require a LCD projector. The LCD projector projects the image shown on the computer screen onto a wall so all participants are able to view the broadcast with ease.

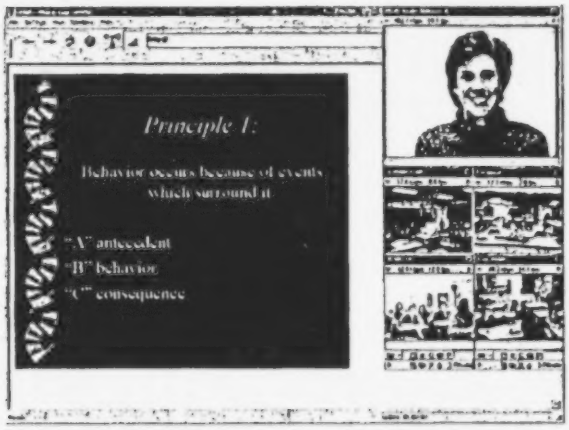

Figure 1. Instructor and participant view

Courses, Structure and Curricula

Project Impact*NET delivers four semester length courses; the first two courses are designed for paraprofessionals and each class is composed of ten three-hour sessions. The second set of courses is designed for paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers and each class is composed of three, three-hour sessions. All classes use curricula that include a text, and video materials depicting authentic educational situations requiring participants to apply skills or knowledge obtained from class readings or lecture.

The curriculum used for both paraprofessional classes is *Enhancing Skills of Paraeducators, 2nd edition* (ESP: 2) (Morgan, Forbush, & Avis, 2001). The primary objective of the ESP:2 curriculum is to increase paraprofessionals skills in working with at-risk students and students with disabilities. The curriculum used for the teacher and paraprofessional class is *Colleagues in the Classroom*, (CINC) (Morgan, Gee, Merrill, Gerity &

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Brenchley 1998). The primary objective of the CINC curriculum is to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills to supervise their paraprofessionals and to form and strengthen their instructional team. Both curricula were developed and evaluated in previous grants from the U.S. Department of Education.

The structure of all project Impact*NET courses include a pre and posttest curriculum based assessment to assess students' pre-knowledge and end of course achievement. At the end of each unit or lesson in the text, participants are encouraged to complete the corresponding progress check in preparation for the weekly quiz. In addition, participants are to complete application exercises utilizing the knowledge and skills taught. Each course is graded on a pass/fail basis and participants who successfully complete a course are provided with an attractive certificate of completion and a detailed list of objectives that they successfully met to pass the course.

For each weekly session, the participant, instructor and site coordinator have a series of tasks that must be completed to experience a successful class session. Participants are expected to complete the assigned reading from the text, respond to the progress quiz and complete any application exercises assigned for the week. The instructor must prepare the session lecture, discussion items, application exercises, produce PowerPoint slides, produce the session agenda listing instructional activities by start time and duration of the instructional activity, select video segments that support session objectives, work with the instructional design team to list materials on the project website and finalize the items required for instruction. To be prepared for the session, the site coordinator must review the assigned readings and download session related information (e.g., session lesson plan, worksheets, handouts of Powerpoint slides) from the project web site. Site facilitators are required to know the content in the session sufficiently well that they can deliver the training on their own if the instructional system malfunctions. In addition, site coordinators must also grade progress checks and assignments from the previous session.

Assessment

Student achievement and course evaluation are the two types of assessment data collected each semester. Student achievement is assessed using a pre-posttest curriculum based assessment at the beginning and end of each course. In addition, students' acquisition of course knowledge and skill is assessed weekly with progress checks that reference weekly readings and lecture. Finally, students' performance on completed assignments is evaluated to assess student progress and the quality of instruction.

Course evaluation data is provided by participants, site coordinators and project board advisors. Participants and site coordinators evaluate the course at the end of the semester; but they also evaluate each session. At the conclusion of each session, site coordinators facilitate a 3-5 minute discussion with their respective participants to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the session. As comments are offered they are keyed into an email message by the site technology assistant and then sent directly to the instructor before leaving for the evening. Session feedback has been very valuable because it has allowed instructors to improve instruction in advance of the next session.

The course evaluation completed at the end of the semester prompts participants and site coordinators to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the various features of each course and the project. The course evaluation form is composed of 35 questions addressing the quality of the course, instruction, curriculum, and video and audio signal. Course evaluation questions use a six point Likert scale. After each question, a box is provided for the respondent to write a narrative comment in response to the question.

Early in the formation of Project Impact*NET an advisory board was formed. This six member advisory board is represented by two national leaders in paraprofessional training, a parent of a student with a disability, a paraprofessional with extensive experience in public schools and a special education faculty member recognized for her knowledge and skill in leading a distance education training program. During the semester VHS tape recordings of the second session and all that follow were sent out to board advisors. In addition to the VHS tape each board member also received a copy of the syllabus, session materials, lesson plan and external readings. Given this information to aide in establishing a context for the session, the board advisor viewed the video tape and responded to the same comprehensive course evaluation form that participants responded to at the end of the semester. Once received by project staff, board advisor comments are reviewed by the project team and suggestions for change are considered and then implemented.

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Finally, at the end of the semester all board advisors and project staff participated in a conference call to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the semester courses and consider new directions for the next semester.

Conclusions

Given the federal training mandates and the restricted timeline for meeting training requirements, state and local agencies need a variety of options from which to select. Several options will allow agencies to assess their own needs and select the most appropriate alternative. Given further refinement, the live, internet-based system described may work well for state and local education agencies having limited numbers of local experts for training delivery. For these agencies, such as those in rural and remote areas or those employing teachers with other priorities, the system provides an outside instructor and training delivery method. For example, a state educational agency with these training needs may hire an instructor, set up the technology, and deliver training from a distant location to several sites. Or, an agency may contract with a local teacher/personnel preparation program to broadcast to sites.

The system may also be tailored for state and local agencies needing cost efficient training. Although start-up costs are relatively high to establish a broadcast location, costs to district sites are modest. While districts will want to explore ways to cover costs of paraprofessional training, in some situations, some costs may be passed along to paraprofessional trainees.

Currently, this project delivers a sequence of two courses to paraprofessionals. Far more instruction is required to obtain an associate's degree, which is one of the mandate options. However, by establishing a live, internet-based system, a community college or other higher or professional education program may be poised to deliver several courses leading to such a degree. More development and evaluation will determine the extent to which the system is adaptable to different training needs and configurations.

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